

Secret of the Sands inspired by John Murray Archive

Visiting the National Library of Scotland's John Murray Archive gave Scottish writer Sara Sheridan a novel idea for a new book.

Sara was inspired to write her novel *Secret of the Sands* after a senior curator took her on a tour of the archive, which is home to over 150,000 papers, manuscripts, letters and other documents recording the business of the influential John Murray publishing dynasty. The firm represented many of the world's most celebrated writers, thinkers, politicians, explorers, economists and scientists, including Lord Byron, Jane Austen, Charles Darwin and David Livingstone.

It was there that Sara discovered letters written by James Raymond Wellsted, a lieutenant in the Indian navy, and was instantly intrigued. Wellsted's correspondence motivated Sara to use the Library's resources to research the lieutenant's travels in the Middle East in the 1830s and the politics of the time, including the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire. As a result of the visit, other historical figures also became characters in her novel, including John Murray III and slavery campaigner, William Wilberforce.

Sara said: "Curator David McClay showed me three letters that James Raymond Wellsted had written in the 1830s when he was a lieutenant in the Bombay Marine and I knew instantly that I wanted to use the material. It set me off on the trail to find out more.

"Wellsted's voice was fresh and inspirational – he's a massively engaging character and I remember the hairs of the back of my neck prickling. He was a real adventurer – travelling in disguise in highly dangerous conditions. That

kind of adventure really doesn't exist in the same way these days. I'm delighted that David introduced me to these letters, as without them Secret of the Sands would never have been created."

Secret of the Sands is a historical adventure novel following the story of a spirited Abyssinian slave called Zena and her master, a young Arabian adventurer, James Wellsted. The unlikely couple are drawn together on a daring mission to rescue two kidnapped naval officers. The host of other characters are a mixture of real-life figures and fictional characters inspired by Sara's research.

David McClay, Senior Curator at National Library of Scotland, added: "Sara's visit to the National Library of Scotland provides an example of just how inspirational our collections can be.

"It was wonderful to witness how moved she was by reading Wellsted's letters, and this correspondence is only a tiny fragment of the material contained in the John Murray Archive. I have eagerly awaited Secret of the Sands being published and I am looking forward to reading the completed novel."

Sara Sheridan's historical novel Secret of the Sands is published this month by HarperCollins, priced £7.99